

Parents Awareness of Reading Habits of Children

—A Survey

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"Enthusiasm for books is caught, not taught, and a sensitive adult awareness is essential for this to happen," writes Janet Hill. How can adults encourage children to read? The obvious answer is by making sure they have access to books. But accessibility on its own is not enough. Unless those involved with children are plainly enthusiastic about all kinds of books themselves, the chance of catching the reading habit in childhood are nowhere near as great as they could be. The habit of reading develops in a child through fictional material, stories, magazines and books other than the textbooks. Parents can best encourage this interest in children.

Time and again publishers have voiced their difficulty in selling children's books; hence producing books for children is not an economically viable proposition. They seek consumers, parents seek books and children need them. Therefore, the parent comes into focus. Their attitudes towards children's reading influence strongly the expansion of children's literature in the country.

Survey Procedure:

To study the awareness and attitude towards reading habits of children, a survey was organised in Delhi as a part of the AWIC's activities, in October 1981. A simple questionnaire was prepared to find out the parents' personal data, their own choice of books, how much they spend on books, their choice of their children in

books, sources of books for children, and lastly their understanding of the significance of extra reading.

The responses were taken in definite categories with fixed answer categories too, except two questions, where the respondent wrote the names of papers and magazines they subscribed to. All the Delhi-based members of AWIC were requested to collect data. Therefore, the sample extended through all regions of the Delhi urban area. In all 250 questionnaires were circulated and 94 completed questionnaires were received. These results are based on the responses of 94 parents and were put through a simple content analysis.

The Economic Factor

Socio-economic class distinctions are prominent in Indian society, especially in educational pursuits. People of the upper socio-economic class send their children to expensive public schools while most others are unable to afford such education.

AWIC members collected information from sources where they were sure of responses, i.e. the educated class.

The group of people we have here belong to the Rs 10,000 to Rs 40,000 per annum income group; their average educational qualification is post-graduation level or a professional training degree/diploma. All of them are employed in professional or semi-professional jobs.

The results indicate an awareness in this class towards reading and purchase of books. On an average, a respondent with

an average salary of Rs 25,883 per annum spends 1.18% of his salary in purchasing books for himself and 0.74% of the salary on books for children, excluding textbooks. In other words, a person earning Rs 30,000 annually spends Rs 354.00 in buying books for himself and Rs 222.00 on books for children.

We further divided the salaries into three categories; the percentage expense on books in each category is as follows:

Annual Salary	Expenditure on books for self	Expenditure on books for children
Rs 40,000 — Rs 30,000	1.21%	0.82%
Rs 29,000 — Rs 20,000	1.08%	0.70%
Rs 19,000 — Rs 10,000	1.16%	0.69%

The percentage expense on books for self and children of these three groups in this study do not contradict the results for the entire sample.

Indian societies comprise of a majority of underprivileged people, not included here; this study caters to a special group of society. However, a relative evaluation of expenditure on books in comparison to other expenses like entertainment, etc. may provide more validity to the results, and show more clearly parental awareness of reading habits of children.

Reading habits of parents

In order to judge the parents' attitude towards reading their children's it was necessary to know the reading interests of the parents. It is common knowledge that children like to imitate their parents and this pattern is true with reading also.

Most parents buy a newspaper regularly. Some parents subscribe to two or three papers: The *Times of India*, *Hindustan Times* and *Indian Express* are the choices of the majority, though many go in for *Economic Times*, *Statesman*, *Navbharat Times*, and some for *Maharashtra Times*. There is a solitary subject who does not



subscribe to a newspaper but he does subscribe to three magazines. Most of the respondents subscribe to one to four magazines regularly. About 20% of the sample does not subscribe to any magazine and only 24.3 subscribes to magazines for their children. Those who do not subscribe to magazines regularly for their children do buy them occasionally, including these in the books budget.

The picture brightens when it comes to books. Apart from one or two exceptions all of them read. While fathers mostly read professional books, mothers care more for mystery, romance, science fiction, poetry and religious books. This fact illustrates that the busy life of Delhi restricts reading for pleasure to a great extent. A majority 68.57% of the parents are members of a library, usually institutional or office libraries where they work.

Reading habits of children

When asked whether their children liked to read books other than textbooks, practically all parents responded in the affirmative, also stating the difference in tastes of their children. The choice of books depends mainly on the age of the child. Since the ages of the children

ranged from two (single case) to sixteen years, the preference for books varies, directly related to age. For instance, a six-year-old girl likes comics; a seven-year-old boy adventure, mystery and mythology in that order. The parent points out that his two-year-old likes animal stories and insist that his mother read them out daily, which in this case, she does.

A prominent feature of the answers is that comics are nearly everyone's favourites, poetry is liked least. Those who do read poetry rate it last or last but one in order of preference. Adventure stories, fairy tales and animal stories are among the most liked fiction. Next come mystery, plays, mythology, science fiction, and general knowledge books. Parents who know the interest of their children's tastes in reading show their own awareness of the importance of books.

The people belonging to upper strata of society are well-versed both in English and in their mother-tongue; they read in both languages. The majority of the respondents belong to Hindi-speaking areas and 54% registered their preference for Hindi books. The children read and enjoy for approximately one hour on an average and borrow books from both library and friends. The average child spends one to two hours daily on homework and study. This limits pleasure-reading but does not reduce interest in books.

Book Buying

How often do parents buy books for their children? In our sample about 48% of the parents buy books once a month, 34% buy more often and 18% seldom buy books. The availability of books and degree of fondness for reading requires further research.

The respondents in this study show their awareness of reading habits of their children implicitly, through knowledge of the

likes and dislikes, expenses incurred on books, and explicitly, by accepting that books help all-round development, increases general knowledge and improves language comprehension. None of the parents queried felt that reading for pleasure is deterrent to high achievement in school studies and is a waste of time. Most of them accept that such reading aids school work. While some have their doubts about this, some of the parents feel that sometimes preoccupation with story books disturbs academic studies. Nevertheless, reading fiction and non-fiction is helpful in improving knowledge of people, places and things, and command over language.

The Teacher's Role:

In the modern educational system, the school is an extension of the family. The parents were asked what they felt about the teacher's and school's role in developing a love for reading among children. Parents feel teachers equally share the responsibility for a child's interest (or lack of it) in books. Even though teachers are not solely responsible (some parents insist), their role as parent substitutes in building readers cannot be discounted.

In general, nearly everyone voiced complaints against inadequate school libraries and lack of encouragement from teachers to read.

Suggestions:

This study deals with a small fragment of Indian society. Other socio-economic classes deserve more attention, which will also bring to surface other variables affecting the reading habit of children favourably or unfavourably. The significance of catching the child young, to read has national importance. Since at least this tiny section has demonstrated their fondness for books, let us provide them abundantly.